

# ***Oneness in Christ***

## ***Unity and Broken Relationships***

Lesson #10 for December 8, 2018

Scriptures: 2 Timothy 4:11; Philemon 1-25; 2 Corinthians 10:12-15; Romans 5:10-11; Ephesians 4:26; Matthew 18:15-17.

1. Even after that incredible experience at Pentecost, there were still times when the early Christians had some differences and conflicts. What lessons can we learn from their experiences? Once again, we are reminded that the greatest demonstration of the gospel's power should be seen in the lives and actions of church members and church groups. (John 13:35)
2. In our previous lessons, we discussed the fact that Paul and Barnabas were set apart and ordained by the church at Antioch to conduct their first missionary journey. Although we do not know exactly why or how it happened, John Mark, the cousin of Barnabas, accompanied them through Cypress and on to Perga in Pamphylia. Because of the difficulties of the way and perhaps some other factors, John Mark left them and returned home. (Acts 13:13) Sometime later, Paul and Barnabas discussed the possibility of going on a second missionary journey. Barnabas wanted to take John Mark with them again; but, Paul voiced his opinion very strongly against it. (Acts 15:36-39)

This desertion caused Paul to judge Mark unfavorably, and even severely, for a time. Barnabas, on the other hand, was inclined to excuse him because of his inexperience. He felt anxious that Mark should not abandon the ministry, for he saw in him qualifications that would fit him to be a useful worker for Christ.—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*\* 170.1.
3. Considering some of the gracious things he wrote, Paul has sometimes been called *the apostle of forgiveness*. Fortunately, later in his experience, he appreciated John Mark and asked for his help on several occasions. (See Colossians 4:10-11 and 2 Timothy 4:11.) It would be nice if we had more details about how their reconciliation took place; but, we do not.
4. A second story that we will consider in this lesson is the story of Paul and Onesimus. Onesimus had been a slave of Philemon who lived either in Colossae or possibly Laodicea; both were in the same valley as Hierapolis. Apparently, Onesimus had stolen something from Philemon and had escaped to Rome. There, he somehow met Paul and became a Christian.
5. It would have been very interesting to listen to the conversation between Paul and Onesimus when Paul broke to him the idea that he must return to Philemon.
6. It was nearing the end of Paul's first imprisonment in Rome, and he was planning to send Tychicus back to Ephesus and Colossae with letters to those churches. He determined that he should send Onesimus with Tychicus. He wrote a short letter to appeal to Philemon to accept his runaway slave back again. It is important for us to recognize that runaway slaves were harshly treated in those days; often, they were killed. Try to imagine Tychicus and Onesimus approaching the home of Philemon. We do not know if Onesimus carried the letter himself; or, if Tychicus carried it and gave it to Philemon first.

7. Read this incredible letter from Paul to Philemon.

**Philemon:** <sup>1</sup> From Paul, a prisoner for the sake of Christ Jesus, and from our brother Timothy—

To our friend and fellow-worker Philemon, <sup>2</sup>and the church that meets in your house, and our sister Apphia, and our fellow-soldier Archippus:

<sup>3</sup> May God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ give you grace and peace.

#### Philemon's Love and Faith

<sup>4</sup> Brother Philemon, every time I pray, I mention you and give thanks to my God. <sup>5</sup>For I hear of your love for all God's people and the faith you have in the Lord Jesus. <sup>6</sup>My prayer is that our fellowship with you as believers will bring about a deeper understanding of every blessing which we have in our life in union with Christ. <sup>7</sup>Your love, dear brother, has brought me great joy and much encouragement! You have cheered the hearts of all God's people.

#### A Request for Onesimus

<sup>8</sup> For this reason I could be bold enough, as your brother in Christ, to order you to do what should be done. <sup>9</sup>But because I love you, I make a request instead. I do this even though I am Paul, the ambassador of Christ Jesus, and at present also a prisoner for his sake. <sup>10</sup>So I make a request to you on behalf of Onesimus, who is my own son in Christ; for while in prison I have become his spiritual father. <sup>11</sup>At one time he was of no use to you, but now he is useful both to you and to me.

<sup>12</sup> I am sending him back to you now, and with him goes my heart. <sup>13</sup>I would like to keep him here with me, while I am in prison for the gospel's sake, so that he could help me in your place. <sup>14</sup>However, I do not want to force you to help me; rather, I would like you to do it of your own free will. So I will not do anything unless you agree.

<sup>15</sup> It may be that Onesimus was away from you for a short time so that you might have him back for all time. <sup>16</sup>And now he is not just a slave, but much more than a slave: he is a dear brother in Christ. How much he means to me! And how much more he will mean to you, both as a slave and as a brother in the Lord!

<sup>17</sup> So, if you think of me as your partner, welcome him back just as you would welcome me. <sup>18</sup>If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to my account. <sup>19</sup>Here, I will write this with my own hand: I, Paul, will pay you back. (I should not have to remind you, of course, that you owe your very self to me.) <sup>20</sup>So, my brother, please do me this favor for the Lord's sake; as a brother in Christ, cheer me up!

<sup>21</sup> I am sure, as I write this, that you will do what I ask—in fact I know that you will do even more. <sup>22</sup>At the same time, get a room ready for me, because I hope that God will answer the prayers of all of you and give me back to you.

## Final Greetings

<sup>23</sup> Epaphras, who is in prison with me for the sake of Christ Jesus, sends you his greetings, <sup>24</sup>and so do my fellow-workers Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke.

<sup>25</sup> May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.—American Bible Society. (1992). *The Holy Bible: The Good News Translation\** (2nd ed., Philemon 1-25). New York: American Bible Society.

8. What do you think of Paul's arguments? Do you think he ever intended to pay any money back to Philemon?
9. Do we have any idea what the outcome was of Paul's writing this letter? What happened to Onesimus? It is interesting that in about 110 A.D., Bishop Ignatius of Antioch wrote a letter to the Bishop of Ephesus who was a man named Onesimus. *Onesimus* was a fairly common name, especially for slaves; it meant *useful*. Notice Paul's play on the name in Philemon 11. Do you think this could have been the same Onesimus? (See E. J. Goodspeed's *Introduction to the New Testament* page 121 and following.) Is it possible that Onesimus may even have helped to collect all Paul's letters together to form what we know as the New Testament? Many scholars believe that may have taken place in Ephesus.
10. It is fascinating to consider the possibility that this same slave, Onesimus, may one day have been the "bishop" or "elder" of Ephesus. This is particularly significant in light of the fact that Ephesus apparently became the "publication center" for the early Christian church. Thus, it is possible that this former slave indeed may have had considerable influence in putting together our New Testament! Paul's diplomatic letter may have had a great influence on the Christian church for all time to come!
11. Why didn't Paul just tell Philemon that good Christians should not have slaves? Why didn't he forcefully speak against the institution of slavery? If he had done so, it would have probably been a death knell for the Christian church. Slaves were quite different in Paul's day than in our day. If one was in too much debt in Paul's day, s/he would sell herself/himself into slavery to pay the debts. Today, we have bankruptcy laws.
12. But, if slaveowners had done what Paul recommended in the book of Philemon, all class distinctions would have been eliminated. (Galatians 3:28; Colossians 3:10-11)
13. Was Paul treating all Christians as equal? He showed his love for both Philemon and Onesimus by trying to bring about resolution.
14. Fortunately, in most parts of the world, slavery is completely forbidden today. But, what lessons might we learn from this experience that could help us in relationships in our day?
15. Paul could have demanded that Philemon do what he wanted him to do. But, Paul's approach was much more winsome and probably was the reason for the inclusion of this letter in the Scriptures.
16. Read 1 Corinthians 3:5-11; 12:1-11; and 2 Corinthians 10:12-15. After having spent one and one-half years in Corinth working to build up the church there, Paul, working in Ephesus, received a letter from them asking about certain issues. He also received some information from members of Chloe's family who had apparently traveled to Ephesus. So, Paul wrote what we know as 1 Corinthians. The passages mentioned above are examples of very clear advice from Paul about how they should have resolved some of their

differences. But, reading between the lines, we discover that they did not readily receive his advice given in 1 Corinthians. So, he apparently made a brief trip back to Corinth, probably by ship; they were very unfriendly and rebuffed him. He returned to Ephesus; with much prayer and fasting, he wrote a very strong letter, sometimes called a *Sinai letter*, to them which is probably what we have recorded in 2 Corinthians 10-13. He sent that letter with Titus who traveled all the way around through Macedonia to reach Corinth. Then, Paul waited and waited. He finally became so concerned that he decided to go himself, once again, to Corinth, late in the season, traveling through Macedonia. It was at least his third trip around through Macedonia that we have recorded. He kept hoping he would meet Titus and hear what the result of his letter had been. Fortunately, somewhere in Macedonia, the two met; Titus assured him that the Corinthians had accepted his letter and were reforming their ways. He then wrote what we have recorded in 2 Corinthians 1-9.

17. How do you feel about the way in which Paul dealt with those problems in Corinth? Paul recognized that different people will have different gifts and different talents; but, they must learn how to work together to spread the gospel. It is natural for us to somehow feel that when we are trying to spread the gospel, we are somehow in competition with others trying to do the same. We must not be in competition but always in cooperation.

All comparisons with others are unwise, because they will make us feel either discouraged or arrogant. If we think that others are far “superior” to us, we will feel despondent when we compare ourselves to them and easily can get discouraged in whatever ministry we are in. On the other hand, if we think our labors for Christ are more effective than is the work of others, we will feel proud, which is the last sentiment any Christian should be harboring.

Both attitudes cripple our effectiveness for Christ and the fellowship we have with one another. As we labor within the sphere of influence that Christ has given us, we will find joy and contentment in our witness for Christ. Our labors will complement the efforts of other members, and the church of Christ will make giant strides for the kingdom.—*Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide\** for Tuesday, December 4.

18. What is the role of forgiveness in dealing with problems within the church? When we forgive someone, are we giving them permission to continue their bad behavior? Certainly not! And we must not wait until the offender repents to offer forgiveness. Remember that God is forgiveness personified. Jesus forgave the men who were nailing Him to the cross, and they certainly had not asked for forgiveness! (Luke 23:34)

Romans 5:8-11: <sup>8</sup>But God has shown us how much he loves us—it was while we were still sinners that Christ died for us! <sup>9</sup>By his blood we are now put right with God; how much more, then, will we be saved by him from God’s anger! <sup>10</sup>We were God’s enemies, but he made us his friends through the death of his Son. Now that we are God’s friends, how much more will we be saved by Christ’s life! <sup>11</sup>But that is not all; we rejoice because of what God has done through our Lord Jesus Christ, who has now made us God’s friends.—*Good News Bible.\**

19. How incredibly gracious God has been with us, His sinful children. How does the death of Christ make us God’s friends? Compare 2 Corinthians 5:20-21.

20. Do confession and repentance always lead to reconciliation? How should we respond if reconciliation does not follow?
21. When we confess our sins to God, He is faithful in forgiving us. (1 John 1:9) But, confession is vitally important because it initiates a change in our attitude toward God and not because it changes His attitude toward us. However, what we really need is change in our attitude and behavior, not forgiveness.
22. If someone has truly wronged us, we need to be just as forgiving as God is. If we continue to harbor bad feelings toward them, it is hurting us more than it is hurting them. God has released us from condemnation, and He has forgiven our sins. How can we condemn a fellow church member no matter what s/he has done.
23. So, how should we go about restoring harmony within the church if there have been some problems?

**Matthew 18:15-17:** <sup>15</sup> “If your brother sins against you, go to him and show him his fault. But do it privately, just between yourselves. If he listens to you, you have won your brother back. <sup>16</sup>But if he will not listen to you, take one or two other persons with you, so that ‘every accusation may be upheld by the testimony of two or more witnesses,’ as the scripture says. <sup>17</sup>And if he will not listen to them, then tell the whole thing to the church. Finally, if he will not listen to the church, treat him as though he were a pagan or a tax collector.”—*Good News Bible*.\*

How are we to treat a pagan or a tax collector? Should it be with love and caring?

24. Is it really possible to do that whenever such a problem arises? It seems very clear that the advice of Jesus would be excellent to follow and would minimize the repercussions of any wrong that has been done. When the news of such a wrong is spread far and wide, people tend to take sides and draw battle lines.
25. Occasionally, very open transgression against a church member which the party refuses to admit means that he should be put out of the church. Persistent problems like that can tear a church apart.

Do not suffer resentment to ripen into malice. Do not allow the wound to fester and break out in poisoned words, which taint the minds of those who hear. Do not allow bitter thoughts to continue to fill your mind and his. Go to your brother, and in humility and sincerity talk with him about the matter.—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*,\* vol. 7, 261.1; *Gospel Workers*\* 499.1.

26. Notice these additional words of comment and recommendation from Ellen White.

When the laborers have an abiding Christ in their own souls, when all selfishness is dead, when there is no rivalry, no strife for the supremacy, when oneness exists, when they sanctify themselves, so that love for one another is seen and felt, then the showers of the grace of the Holy Spirit will just as surely come upon them as that God’s promise will never fail in one jot or tittle.—Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*,\* Book 1, 175.2; *1MR*\* 178.1.

If we stand in the great day of the Lord with Christ as our refuge, our high tower, we must put away all envy, all strife for the supremacy. We must

utterly destroy the roots of these unholy things, that they may not again spring up into life. We must place ourselves wholly on the side of the Lord.—Ellen G. White, *Last Day Events*\* 190.2; *TDG*\* 258.4 (1903). See Hebrews 12:14-15.

27. Benjamin Franklin once set for himself the goal of becoming a better person. There were thirteen things on his list; the last was humility. After having worked his way down the list and coming to humility, he decided that he was so good that he just could not be humble! (See <https://benfranklincircles.org/humility/a-lesson-in-humility>.)
28. Look at the advice of Paul in Colossians 3:12-17. Christians should have compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, tolerance, forgiveness, love, peace, and in all things be thankful. Imagine how wonderful it would be to live among a group of Christians where these traits were manifested by all.
29. What do you think are the greatest barriers to having this kind of peace, harmony, and unity in the worldwide Seventh-day Adventist Church? Surely, we recognize that the gospel of Jesus Christ is all about healing and transformation. How can we claim that we are preparing for the second coming and that we really want to be like Jesus unless we start practicing? How does character change take place? By beholding we become changed! The Devil has one goal in mind: To eliminate all of God's people from this earth.
30. Last week, we talked about the impact of church members individually and as groups on those around them. If we are fighting and squabbling among ourselves, does that attract people? If someone wrongs us repeatedly, do we just keep forgiving them? Surely, we would all recognize that God's grace and forgiveness has been incredibly extravagant.
31. Our attitudes will lead to either the healing of relationships or the destruction of them. Which do we really want?
32. In our lesson for this week, we have seen the cases of two people that Paul dealt with in one way or another. It seems that in both cases, reconciliation was made that proved to be a great blessing to the church. Could we live up to those examples?
33. Forgiveness requires a conscious choice to give up feelings of resentment and anger. It means that we will not seek revenge in any way. We do not need to wait until the offending party asks for forgiveness. Following the example of God, we should offer forgiveness even before a confession is made. Forgiveness will help to root out anger and bitterness in our own lives.
34. How often do differences of opinion because of theological understandings lead to problems? Often, in such cases, both sides are sure that they are in the right! What is the role of forgiveness and reconciliation in such cases? Could we have theological differences and still come to true reconciliation.
35. Are there any problem areas that you are aware of in your local church? Or, in the worldwide church? Could you follow the example of Christ by offering forgiveness and healing to those who have wronged you or perhaps feel that they have been wronged?

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